Lessons from History of Education

The selected works of Richard Aldrich

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World Library of Educationalists

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Lessons from History of Education

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- the politics of education
- educational reformers
- curriculum and standards
- the teaching of history
- education otherwise.

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Richard Aldrich is Emeritus Professor of History of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London.

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INTRODUCTION

Starting points

'As nothing teaches, so nothing delights more than history. The first of these recommends it to the study of grown men, the latter makes me think it fittest for a young lad.'[1] So wrote John Locke in 1693. My delight in history was acquired as a young lad and has remained to this day. My belief that there are lessons to be drawn from history, and not least from history of education, has developed over many years as a student and teacher of the subject.

History – a term variously used to describe the occurrence, study, recording and interpretation of human and other events with particular reference to the dimension of time – is all embracing. Other subjects – from art to zoology – have their devotees, and rightly so, but nothing can be compared to history. For history encompasses everything that has happened, is happening and will happen. All knowledge is its province. The study of history is not merely informative; it is also potentially instructive for it enlarges our range of human experience.

Education has also been variously defined: as preparation for knowledge, as initiation into and development in worthwhile activities, as social control, as a country's biggest business. My own working definition has been that education is concerned with the promotion of knowledge over ignorance, of truth over falsehood, of concern for others over selfishness, of mental and physical well-being over despair and debility. While education may be variously defined, however, its centrality to human existence is not in doubt. 'Education will not supply all the answers to the problems that beset us, either as individuals or as a nation, but it is the best means of promoting intellectual, moral, physical and economic well-being.'[2]

Two important acknowledgements must be made at this point. The first is that some historians, including historians of education, would deny that it is possible to draw any lessons from history. The second is that different lessons may be drawn from consideration of the same events. Each of us brings her or his own assumptions, predispositions and frames of analysis to bear. These are shaped by a variety of factors, including individual and societal histories, experiences, beliefs and principles. Factors in my case include a wartime childhood in a heavily bombed part of south-east London and for two years as an evacuee in Wales, a host of defining adult moments in terms of personal and professional commitments, a never-ending spiritual and intellectual journey across the borderlands of religious belief and unbelief, and principles (though sadly less frequently practices) drawn from sources ranging from the Sermon on the Mount to Rudyard Kipling's poem, 'If'.[3]

My approach to education has been construed in the most fortunate circumstances. Six years of school teaching and eight in a college of education were followed by 30 years at the Institute of Education of the University of London, an institution with a metropolitan and

international culture and characterized by 'brave leadership, challenging students, intellectual daring, wit, incandescent teaching, and fierce dedication to matters of the mind'.[4] This experience has been complemented by visiting professorships, lectures and consultancies in more than 20 countries.

What lessons can be drawn from history of education? Specific examples are to be found in this Introduction and in the conclusions to the several pieces included in the collection, but four basic lessons are drawn here.

The first is a response to the general question of what can be learned from history overall:

> My personal answer would be couched in terms of: an acquaintance with a much greater range of human experience than would be possible simply by reference to the contemporary world; an enlarged understanding of that experience which may promote an enlarged understanding of one's own potential and possibilities; opportunities for creating interpretations of human experience which may be of interest in themselves and which, though not directly transferable from one situation to another, may promote the capacity better to interpret other situations – both historical and contemporary; a more sophisticated awareness of the nature of knowledge and of truth.[5]

The second lesson is that the historian of education has a particular responsibility to draw conclusions from her or his study because the subject of education is not neutral but includes a concept of value or merit. For example, to teach someone to be a liar or a thief would be described not as education but as mis-education. A study of the history of education, therefore, has the potential to demonstrate not only how people have lived their lives in the past, but also how we may live better in the present and future. Such study is all-embracing. The site of struggle is not simply the school or the formal educational system; it is life itself. During the twentieth century, millions of lives were sacrificed and millions more blighted in pursuit of such creeds as nationalism, imperialism, fascism and communism. The twenty-first century has already seen the rise of elements of Christian neo-conservative and Islamic extremism. Of course the history of education may also be seen as 'a history of conflict, contest and grudging accommodation'. Nevertheless, 'There has been a broad consensus that education is a prime agent in increasing culture and civilization and in diminishing anarchy and barbarism.'[6]

The third lesson is that our journeys in the present and the future may be enhanced by having as accurate a map of the past as possible. Informed decision-making depends upon locating ourselves and our society accurately in time. For example, it is salutary to remember the extreme brevity, in historical perspective, of civilized human existence as we know it, and the miniscule span of time of those economic and social (including educational) contexts that are often taken for granted today. Although the Earth is millions of years old, 20,000 years ago most of what now constitutes the United Kingdom was under ice, while even 10,000 years later the entire population of the British Isles was 'possibly no more than a few hundred people'.[7] Less than 200 years ago the only means of land transport, apart from walking, was still by horse power. Elementary schooling for all was a product of the second half of the nineteenth century; secondary schooling for all of the second half of the twentieth. In 1900, university education in the United Kingdom was experienced by less than one per cent of the population. Even by 1962 this had only risen to four per cent.[8] Little wonder that the widely proclaimed target of 50 per cent participation in the first decade of the twenty-first century raises fundamental questions about the nature, provision and financing of higher education.

Two examples of the value of such a map of the past are provided here.

On the one hand, it is clear that the lack of an historical perspective can lead to avoidable errors, not least in the re-invention of the wheel (a potentially flawed wheel) by educational

reformers ignorant of the fate of previous similar schemes. One instance is the fate of Education Action Zones, apparently established with little regard to the experience of the Educational Priority Areas, introduced some 30 years before following the report of the Plowden Committee of 1967. Indeed, the recent history of educational reform in the United Kingdom shows the limitations of quick fixes of a political or administrative kind. Structures are important, as are broader economic and social contexts, but successful education depends essentially upon the long-term commitment of good teachers and motivated students. Ravitch and Vinovskis and Semel and Sadovnik have provided substantial studies of lessons to be drawn from history of education in respect of school reform in the United States.[9] The first of these volumes provides a variety of examples – from the value of early childhood education for poor children to the application of business methods to school administration – in support of its general thesis that contemporary policy-makers in the United States who propose school reforms 'need the knowledge, experience and wisdom that history provides'.[10] Similarly, in their historical study of American progressive education Semel and Sadovnik argue that 'educational reformers would do well to study the child-centred progressive schools for models of what worked, what failed, and why'. They rightly conclude that 'It is time that educational reformers and practitioners stop reinventing the wheel. It is also time for historians of education to assume active roles in policy conversations.'[11]

An accurate historical map may serve not only in a cautionary capacity but also as a means of providing answers to what may otherwise appear to be baffling contemporary questions. For example, in 1993 the Secretary of State for Education, John Patten, was reported as asking 'Why don't people in this country feel they own state education?' An answer to this question, which demonstrates how during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the ownership of education was removed from English people, is provided in *Education for the Nation.*[12] While conducting research for this book it became clear that this and many other key questions about education today can only be understood, and in some cases answered, by reference to history.

The final lesson is that historical study shows the complexity of human events, including the co-existence of continuities and changes. Continuities are represented by values, practices and institutions that have stood the test of time. Thus the fundamental attributes of a good teacher were much the same in the seventeenth century as they are in the twenty-first. So, too, were some of the basic pedagogical principles – for example, John Locke's advice to 'Praise in public; blame in private'.[13] Significant general and specific changes over time include the rise of a literate culture from the medieval period onwards and the increased participation of girls in formal schooling and of women in higher education over the last 150 years. Even changes, however, may exhibit some continuity in the shape of cycles or patterns. For example, the school curriculum has been a contested site between advocates of religious, child-centred, subject-based and vocational schemes, as exemplified by the Education Act of 1944, the Plowden Report of 1967, the Education Reform Act of 1988 and the establishment of the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) in 1995.[14] In October 2004, the government introduced the first national framework for religious education in England.

One example of the co-existence of continuity and change is to be found in the history of the Institute of Education of the University of London. Soon after its foundation in 1902, a combination of location, size, singular purpose and quality of staff and students, coupled with the reluctance of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge to champion the subject of education, ensured its pre-eminent role in the training of teachers and educational research. Nevertheless, during the first century it experienced different identities – as the London Day Training College until 1932, thereafter as the University of London's Institute of Education with an additional role as the 'Central Institute' of a wider Institute of Education of some 30 associated colleges and departments of education between 1949 and 1975, and as

a self-governing college of the University of London from 1987. It also occupied three different buildings – in Southampton Row from 1907, the north wing of the Senate House from 1938, and in Bedford Way from 1976.[15]

A second example of the co-existence of continuity and change is provided by *A Century of Education*. In this edited volume ten authors employ quite different approaches to such elements as chronology, primary and secondary sources and methodology in examining ten topics in the history of British education in the twentieth century. Nevertheless an explanatory framework of continuity and change lies at the heart of each chapter and of the book's overall conclusion.[16]

An understanding of the complexities of continuity and change is important in guarding against the assumption that the past has existed merely to lead to the present and that educational progress is similar to that in science or technology. As Elliot Eisner, one of the contemporary educational reformers included in this volume, has commented:

> Education will not have permanent solutions to its problems, we will have no 'breakthroughs', no enduring discoveries that will work for ever . . . What works here may not work there. What works now may not work then. We are not trying to invent radar or measure the rate of free fall in a vacuum. Our tasks are impacted by context, riddled with unpredictable contingencies, responsive to local conditions, and shaped by those we teach and not only by those we teach.[17]

The pieces in this collection have been selected to cover major themes from writings that span more than 20 years.[18] They are set principally within a British or English context. Limitations of space and format mean that some important themes, for example, those of the education of girls and women, schooling and social class and teacher education and training, do not appear as separate sections.[19] All, however, receive some coverage elsewhere, especially in the longest piece, 'Joseph Payne: critic and reformer'. This was originally published as a book chapter.[20] One piece was written as half of a monograph,[21] seven as journal articles or chapters in edited collections,[22] while four were originally delivered as lectures and subsequently published.[23] The eight examples of contemporary reformers are taken from speeches delivered in the capacity of Public Orator when presenting these distinguished figures for honorary awards at the Institute of Education, University of London.

The six parts into which this volume is divided, and the pieces within them, are arranged in thematic rather than chronological order. The first provides an exploration and explanation of my current understanding of history of education; the second is concerned with the politics of education, the theme which first brought me into the field and which has remained a continuing interest. Another fundamental and enduring theme – that of educational reformers – constitutes the third part. The next two deal with elements of the formal education system: curriculum and standards, and the teaching of history. The final part provides examples of learning and teaching outside of school under the heading of 'Education otherwise'.

Understanding history of education

'The three duties of the historian of education' – the duty to the people of the past, to the people of the present and to truth – was published in 2003 and represents my current understanding of history of education and of the role of the historian of education. The title and the theme were suggested by an article on family history by Peter Laslett, whose lectures on the history of political thought I attended as a Cambridge undergraduate in the 1950s. The approach is wide-ranging, not least because my own work has covered a variety of topics and addressed a broad range of audiences – historians and educationists, prospective and

practising teachers, policy-makers and general public. The second piece, 'The end of history and the beginning of education', is based upon an inaugural lecture, somewhat belatedly delivered on 12 March 1997. The first half of the title is taken from Francis Fukuyama's concept of 'The end of history', which first appeared in an article of 1989. The second is derived from the increased importance of education, both as a subject of study and upon the political agenda, an importance confirmed by the Labour Party's 'Education, education, education' mantra in the general election of May 1997.

The pieces in this part represent an attempt to position my work along two lines (or between two gaps) – those that exist between historians and educationists and between modernist and postmodernist historians. In 1999, William Richardson sought to emphasize the distinction between the practice of 'academic historians who reconstruct the past in ways influenced by present concerns and of educationists who invoke the past in order to apply its lessons to present concerns'. He also characterized 'The end of history and the beginning of education' as 'the most recent manifestation of the latter'.[24] This may well be an apposite description of a lecture delivered to an audience composed primarily of educationists rather than historians but I believe that the historian of education can – indeed must – be both an historian and an educationist. Much depends upon context and audience. The selection of pieces for this collection has been influenced by its title and place in a series of works by 'key educationalists', but that choice does not diminish my continuing commitment as an 'academic historian'.

As for modernism and postmodernism, the broadening of discussions about the nature of history beyond those of such historians as E.H. Carr, Geoffrey Elton and Arthur Marwick to include perspectives drawn from the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty and Hayden White is to be welcomed.[25] Keith Jenkins has played a leading role in such discussions in the United Kingdom but his argument as put forward in *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity?* (1999) that 'we now have enough intellectual power to begin to work for an individual and social emancipatory future *without* it [history]',[26] seems to me to be incorrect. The fundamental tenets which pervade the pieces in *Lessons from History of Education* are that the teaching and writing of history will exist for the foreseeable future, that such history should be as good as possible and that a major test of good history is that it approximates most closely to the truth. Jenkins dismisses truths as 'useful fictions',[27] and is at great pains to emphasize the gulf between 'postmodern' and 'modernist' histories, but eschews any answer 'to the frequently asked question of "what would a postmodern history look like?" . . . that would be too modernistic, too prefigurative for words'.[28] Few, if any, 'modernist' historians of today are guilty of the postmodern charge that they believe that historical writing equates exactly with historical events. They may, however, be sceptical about the credibility as historians of those who condemn their work as 'under-theorized' or maintain that history is 'as much invented as found'.

The politics of education

This part contains two strongly contrasting pieces. The first is based upon detailed research in primary sources, concerned with a relatively obscure political figure, and firmly located in the middle of the nineteenth century. The second provides an overview of politics and education throughout the twentieth century.[29] One of the great delights of being an historian (and indeed an educationist) is to engage in the two roles of 'splitter': a scholar who engages in the minutiae of research and produces the detailed monograph; and 'lumper': one who synthesizes the findings from such research and presents them in accessible form to a wider audience.

Educational politics have been a continuing interest and my belief, along with Semel and Sadovnik, that historians of education can 'assume active roles in policy conversations'

has recently been strengthened as a member of the Institute of Education's School of Educational Foundations and Policy Studies. Clearly the relationship between historical writing and contemporary reformism can be a complex one, as Deborah Thom has recently shown with her account of Brian Simon 'as a successful but bashful political activist'.[30]

Any claims to objectivity on my part when working in this area are based upon a tripartite background. My maternal grandfather, Albert Edward Barnes, was a Labour Councillor and Mayor of Southwark and also worked for a time as caretaker at Transport House. My mother attended West Square School, Southwark in the same class as George Brown, the future Labour Foreign Secretary. My nineteenth-century political heroes were the Conservative Prime Ministers, Peel and Disraeli, while Sir John Pakington, the subject of my doctoral research, was a minister in three Conservative governments. For many years, I have been a member of the National Liberal Club.

The first piece, 'Sir John Pakington and the Newcastle Commission', had a long gestation. My initial research and writing in history of education was for an MPhil thesis entitled 'Education and the political parties, 1830–1870', completed in 1970. This topic was 'assigned' by my supervisor and former Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) tutor, A.C.F. Beales of King's College, London, and was one in a trio of theses designed to cover the politics of education from 1830 to 1944.[31] The topic proved to be of considerable interest to me and provided the material for a first publication,[32] but it also threw up a neglected figure, a person who had played a significant part in the educational politics of these years but hitherto had been hidden from history. One of the major lessons to be drawn from this process is that it may be necessary to conduct substantial preliminary research in order to identify some key historical figures and questions. Historical study (in common with other research) involves a perpetual interaction between questions and evidence. Sir John Pakington (1799–1880) thus became the topic of my PhD thesis[33] and the subject of a first monograph.[34] This piece not only examines one episode in Pakington's previously neglected contribution to the story of mid-nineteenth-century politics and education, but also shows that an appreciation of the man and his motives is essential to an understanding of the origins, nature and outcomes of that most important and misunderstood of the major Royal Commissions on education, the Newcastle Commission.

The second piece, 'From Board of Education to Department for Education and Employment', a survey of the central authority for education throughout the twentieth century, was commissioned for the millennium number of the *Journal of Educational Administration and History*. In constructing this article reference was naturally made to primary sources and to the published work of other scholars as well as to my own previous research into twentieth-century politics and education, two examples of which are mentioned here. One lesson, presented as the article's final conclusion – that the DfEE would not long survive – soon came to pass.[35] This judgement was based upon a substantial piece of research, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, which demonstrated the department's uniqueness in historical and comparative perspectives and the contrasting cultures of the two merged departments in terms of size and sphere of activity.[36] Moreover, the Education department had already experienced three reformulations and the Employment department no fewer than five.[37] Nevertheless, similarities and continuities were also apparent. For example, between 1900 and 1994 all but five of the 46 political heads of the Education department were men while between 1916 and 1994 there were 37 ministers for Employment of whom only three were women. Ministers in the two departments served for an average of two years, permanent secretaries for five years at Employment and six at Education.[38]

A second major piece of research that also provided material to draw lessons from the past with reference to current and future policy-making, concerned the Education Act of 1944. In the early 1980s historical discussions of this legislation frequently centred upon

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